DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 051 TM 820 269

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TITLE A Co-Equals Team Approach to Planning, Managing, and Reporting an Evaluation.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (66th, New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Evaluation Methods; *Evaluators; *Management Teams; *Research Methodology; School Districts
IDENTIFIERS Evaluator Credibility; *Los Angeles Unified School District CA

ABSTRACT

An innovative approach to planning, managing, and reporting evaluations was created by a need for conducting an effective evaluation in a bureaucratic setting where credibility was important. A more comprehensive and all-inclusive evaluation results when one person's evaluation perspective is expanded to include other approaches and viewpoints. An evaluation team was chosen by the District's administrator/manager. The team consisted of co-equals who had expert knowledge and specific skills. The team of five experts was chosen because of specific and unique skills and expertise they could contribute. The strengths and weaknesses of the co-equals team approach were generated from responses to a questionnaire. The strengths were combined brainpower applied to the evaluations design and methodology, cost effectiveness due to combined abilities and skills, and completion of evaluation in an effective, professional manner. The weaknesses were lack of clarity of team roles in the beginning of organization and feelings of uncertainty due to the absence of a leader. A team of skilled professionals was employed part time. The co-equals team approach was a productive evaluation model. One evaluator cannot have all of the skills found in a team approach. (Author/DWH)

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ED216051

A CO-EQUALS TEAM APPROACH TO PLANNING, MANAGING, AND REPORTING AN EVALUATION

A Paper Presented at the
Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

New York City
March 18 -23, 1982

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ABSTRACT

A Co-Equals Team Approach to Planning, Managing, and Reporting an Evaluation

An innovative approach to planning, managing, and reporting an evaluation is currently being implemented by the Research and Evaluation Branch of the Los Angeles Unified School District. This approach grew out of a need for conducting an effective evaluation in a bureaucratic setting where credibility is a key factor.

Appropriate evaluation designs and reports can evolve from one person's evaluation perspective or approach. However, if that one approach is "stretched" to employ other approaches and viewpoints, a more comprehensive and all-inclusive evaluation results.

The research and evaluation administrator/manager's experience as an advisory committee member to independent research institutions revealed the value of the contribution of many experts (statisticians, educational practitioners, measurement experts, research and evaluation administrators, etc.) to any evaluation. The fallibility of any evaluation methodology quickly surfaces under the scrutiny of many critical eyes.

Since the school district was heavily involved in court-ordered desegregation, the importance of pooling the resources of many aspects of research and evaluation was evident if the district was to avoid shallow or incomplete findings with political overtones. It was thus decided that the selection of an evaluation team chosen by the District's administrator/manager would be the best course of action. Such a team would consist of members who would be co-equals -- no leader was to be selected. Members of the team were not selected because of similar viewpoints but because each had expert knowledge and specific skills to share. Additionally, it was anticipated that the team approach would provide the necessary components for a productive group.

Also, it was assumed that in the interest of cost effectiveness, an outside team of highly-skilled professionals employed part-time is more economical in these reduced budget days than employing a large, full-time staff.

The co-equals team can be compared metaphorically to a basketball team -- all positions on the team are crucial. Each member possesses specific skills necessary for the team to interact as a cohesive unit to win -- to accomplish the task.

A professional team of five experts was chosen because each has specific and unique skills and expertise to contribute. An analysis of the co-equals team structure was conducted from the perspective of each team member and the administrator. The team responded to five questions. Information about the strengths and weaknesses of the co-equals team approach were generated by their responses.

The major strengths of the approach were:

1. Using a team of evaluation experts together provided brainpower or conceptual power to the evaluation's design and methodology.

2. This is a cost effective strategy because of the combined number of abilities and skills rather than one person's.

3. The composition of the team brought about a feeling of professionalism to get the evaluation completed in a timely and effective manner.

The weaknesses were:

1. Lack of clarity of team roles in the beginning of the team's organization.

2. Feelings of uncertainty because there was no pre-announced leader.

The co-equals team approach to planning, managing and reporting an evaluation appears to be a successful and productive evaluation management model. Since this is an evolving model, additional techniques and information will be generated as the model is replicated in other research and evaluation organizations. In this resources-dwindling environment, this approach was found to be cost effective and this should encourage others to utilize this model. As one co-equal team member observed, one evaluator cannot have all of the skills that are found in a team approach.

INTRODUCTION

There have been many books and articles written about the methodology of evaluation, the utilization of evaluation, and most recently, metaphors and techniques for evaluation. All have provided information that has been useful and needed from an evaluation practitioner's point of view. However, what has become quite evident is that there is a dearth of information on how to manage evaluation in a bureaucratic setting. In university classes, professional seminars, and conferences, much time is spent discussing the the intricacies of doing evaluations. Yet, before an evaluation can be done, someone has to set up the organization and mechanisms for the evaluation to begin, progress, and hopefully end productively and effectively. I think of a hospital with doctors, nurses, and technicians. These persons would be described as practitioners; however, they do not administer the hospital. A hospital administrator manages the everyday life of the hospital. The same may be said for various service-giving organizations. The practitioner's practice while the administrators manage or administer the agency. I looked to public administration in addition to educational administration as the disciplines that could be utilized by a research and evaluation administrator for management purposes. Simon, Smithburg, and Thompson (1950), Bueckner (1968), and Bourke (1969), in their publications, stressed the importance of an administrator's understanding the structure of an organization. With this in mind, the administrator then uses this knowledge to produce responsible and responsive management to accomplish common goals. A research and evaluation office would be defined as a formal organization according to Simon, et al (1950), which is

"a planned system of cooperative effort in which each participant has a recognized role to play and duties or tasks to perform. These duties are assigned in order to achieve the organization's purpose rather than to satisfy individual preferences, although the two often coincide." In order to get a responsible and responsive organization, Bourke (1969) stated "the qualities needed in an administrative role are a gift for negotiation and diplomacy...." In addition to being a negotiator and diplomat, according to Stewart (1978), an effective manager must know how to plan, organize, coordinate, motivate, direct, and control. He further states that, "Management is not a job; it is a profession - - - a dynamic, challenging, and often creative profession."

The administrator of a research and evaluation branch is different from a hospital administrator because this person has to have the knowledge and skills of an evaluator and researcher as well as that of an administrator. In contrast, the hospital administrator does not have to be able to operate on a patient or prescribe a specific treatment for a patient. The research and evaluation administrator has to speak the language of two and sometimes three disciplines, i.e., evaluation and research, schools, and administration, in order to be a critic or a facilitator for proposed evaluation and research methodologies, and at the same time maneuver an evaluation through the bureaucratic maze of a large school system.

As a director of research and evaluation in a large urban school district, I have had many occasions to hire internal and external evaluators to evaluate specific projects and programs. Each one, due to his or her orientation, values, or philosophical approach, has proceeded to

evaluate a program using a particular methodological approach. I have required that the evaluator present a plan or design for evaluation prior to proceeding, but basically the person was free to develop the design without too much interference or challenge to his or her particular approach if the technical requirements were in place. Although many fine reports have evolved from a single person's evaluation perspective or method, I began to wonder what would have happened if the person had been "stretched" to think of other approaches or had heard another viewpoint. In retrospect, having served on several evaluation advisory committees to independent research institutions, I began to see the value of having groups or teams of individuals react to evaluation designs or plans. In my experiences, each advisory committee member brought a particular skill or talent to the deliberations about the evaluation plan -- statistician, educational practitioner, measurement expert, research and evaluation administrator, and so forth. Each offered a different perspective and evaluative approach to trying to find the best way of determining a program's effectiveness and whether a particular group of processes would have a desired impact. This process of active discussion or sometimes hard arguments brought about, in many instances, substantive changes to the design or plan. Also, it brought out the fallibility of an approach. Sometimes the decision was that this approach was the best that could be done under the circumstances and resources at hand. To further develop this point, an evaluator's conceptualization of evaluation or research drives or determines the methodology employed. Airasian, Kellaghan, and Madaus (1979) reported in their article on school effectiveness that modifications of methodological parameters do influence both the conceptualization of a study and the conclusions drawn from its results. Klitgaard and Hall (1973) reasoned that

if the Coleman Report methodology had looked for exceptional or outstanding schools rather than average effects , the findings about the effects of schooling may have been different. When they evaluated school effectiveness using Michigan school data (213 non rural schools) and a different methodology than Coleman (i.e., looked for schools where test scores were at least one standard deviation above the mean for 4 years in a row), Klitgaard and Hall found significant differences on three school-related factors -- small class size, teachers with over 5 years of experience, and teachers whose salaries were $11,000 or more.

MAKING OPERATIONAL A CO-EQUALS TEAM APPROACH

As my school district became heavily involved in a desegregation court case, the court mandated that the educational program designed to bring about desegregation or integration must be evaluated to determine whether this program was successful in removing the effects of the "harms of racial isolation" (Crawford v. Board of Education, 1976). Because of this, there would have been some strong political ramifications if the evaluation reports were shallow or incomplete because the plan or design was not fully developed. As the administrator responsible for seeing that this weakness did not happen, I began to contemplate how the evaluation could be managed effectively. I remembered the lively, fruitful, and productive interactions that came from those previously mentioned advisory evaluation groups. It was at that point that I thought of an evaluation team chosen by the administrator-manager rather than a single evaluator. I would choose individuals who brought particular skills to the process of evaluation and who would, I thought, be able to work together as a team. This was in

contrast to the evaluator who selects a team of persons to work under his or her direction (chosen, in most instances, because they all agree about a particular evaluator's style or method). This time these members would be co-equals. Each team member would have equal status. It would be up to me as the manager to provide the mechanisms for these co-equals to coalesce into a working, productive team.

Another practical consideration in having a team to conduct the evaluation was economics, a growing concern among most school districts with limited and dwindling resources. Large full-time staffs dealing with one program are becoming more and more difficult to fund (such as Title I evaluations). This was referenced by Nick Smith (1981) when he stated that, "The clients and funders of evaluations are seeking more cost-effective and timely approaches to their evaluation needs.

There is an emerging awareness among evaluation practitioners and theorists that evaluation involves more than conducting an experimental study in an applied setting. Evaluation is being recognized as a highly complex technical, economic, political and social activity which requires the skills of many professionals." However, to have this type of staff on an ongoing, permanent basis is truly a financial burden in an era of dwindling resources.

I agree with Bourke (1969) who stated that, "Several factors help to account for the expanding role of outsiders in the internal deliberations of executive agencies. To some extent it is a product of necessity. In many of the highly skilled fields, public agencies cannot recruit enough high caliber personnel for full-time employment to meet their needs. The outsider serving a temporary assignment helps to fill the gap. Many

talented outsiders will serve executive agencies on a temporary or ad hoc basis who could never be attracted to full-time government employment." As a follow-up to this statement, a research and evaluation administrator has to consider how to get the best job done in a cost-effective manner.

The use of external evaluators -- outsiders -- can be a means of getting many top professionals with well-honed skills to perform for a school district and to provide modeling via staff development and on-the-job training for staff who perform as regular school district evaluators. These elements of talent and cost were prominent in my decision to hire an external evaluation planning team to work with regular research and evaluation staff to evaluate a program.

I originally described the team approach to evaluation as that of being co-equals, but by using a metaphor, the explanation of what "co-equals" means becomes clearer.

> "A metaphor is a device for using one object to create a new perspective on another. Saying that 'electricity flows like water' suggests several possible characteristics of electricity based on our understanding of water (Smith, 1981)."

By the same token, I would describe co-equals team evaluation as being like a basketball team. Immediately, there is the picture of five skilled individuals who hold the positions of forwards, guards, and center. Each position has specific tasks but all positions must work together as a unit

to execute the plays and patterns to get the basketball in the hoop to score. If you know the game of basketball, you know a team interacts. You also know that the players on the court are led by a playmaker and coached from the sidelines. You also know there are supplementary persons who support and aid the team in its efforts to win. A parallel organizational structure would exist for a team of co-equal evaluators operating within a bureaucratic organization -- a large urban school district's research and evaluation office."

HOW THE CO-EQUALS TEAM FUNCTIONED: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

In 1980, the team of co-equal external evaluators were selected and then invited to evaluate a group of desegregation or integration programs within the school district. The team met for the first time and were given an overview of the programs and the areas that were to be evaluated. The research and evaluation administrator at that meeting purposely did not choose a leader for the team but felt that the leader would eventually evolve. A support group of school personnel (teachers) were also selected to act as data collectors and summarizers for the team. A "seasoned" staff person in the research and evaluation office was chosen to coordinate the work assigned by the team to the data collectors. This person had the task of being a liaison between the team and the integration planning program office. The team of Marvin Alkin, Eva Baker, Winston Doby, William Doherty, and Nancy Russo worked together throughout the 1980-81 school year to produce several reports mandated by the court (1980). The team members were

individually invited because of the specific skills and different skills they had.

From the viewpoint of the administrator, each of the team members brought specific skills needed for team building while at the same time each had other requisite skills to conduct evaluations such as writing skills, evaluation methodology skills, and so forth.

Marvin Alkin - knowledge of evaluation models, methodologies and evaluation techniques. (Professor of Education at UCLA.)

Eva Baker - administrator and planner of evaluations at the Center for the Study of Evaluation at UCLA. (Director of the Center.)

Winston Doby - evaluator of social action programs and administrator of programs planned for minority youth. (Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs at UCLA).

William Doherty - knowledge of research design, data processing and reduction, and desegregation evaluations. (Member of Applied Social Research Firm and lecturer at USC School of Education.)

Nancy Russo - knowledge of instrument design and desegregation evaluations. (Member of Applied Social Research Firm and lecturer at UCLA School of Education.)

An analysis of the co-equals team organizational structure from the perspective of each team member and the administrator was gathered. The co-equals team information was collected via telephone interviews conducted by the unit heads in the research and evaluation office. Tables A - E provide the responses to the interview items. All interviews were completed within the same week. The responses have been randomized and are not arranged alphabetically.

TABLE A
Interview Responses: Item 1
N = 5

"A co-equals evaluatior planning team is like a basketball team." Please note the above metaphor, and then describe your position on the evaluation planning team. (What specific skills did you bring?)

Respondent 1: The basketball team metaphor is not a bad one. I'm not if I'm the point guard (organizes, keeps things going) or the small forward (does some shooting, gets lots of assists). Seriously, I feel my contributions are in four areas. First, I utilize my administrative skills by organizing activities and outlining responsibilities, etc. Second, I provide a sense of school realism to the team. Third, I provide skills in evaluation report writing, assuring that the reports are user-sensitive.

Respondent 2: "Power forward - because I make clutch shots."
Specific skills: conceptualization of project.
Willing to field political issues (risk).
Fast writer.
Work well with people (team, too).
Flexible. Can accept different roles
Have experience in multisite and multi-method evaluations.

Respondent 3: In keeping with the basketball team analogy, I guess I was the playmaker. Dividing the evaluation into process and outcome, I felt that, in the process area, I contributed management skills. I brought to the team my abilities to plan, organize and direct the various activities and to keep the team moving along on-task. In the outcome area, I was responsible for the Permits with Transportation (PWT) and Magnet School reports.

Respondent 4: Brought data analysis, research design, and computer processing skills to the group.

Respondent 5: Primarily instrument development. Also I brought experience with desegregation issues and the instructional process.

TABLE B
Interview Responses: Item 2
N = 5

What were the initial difficulties (perceived or real) in getting the members of the team to coalesce into a team?

RESPONDENT 1: The major perceived difficulty was in the extent to which team members would assume equal responsibility for the work. All team members were very busy with other activities and I expected a problem in this area. This turned out, however, to be more perceived than real. The self-esteem and professionalism of the team members led them to exert themselves in an equitable manner. A real, as opposed to perceived, difficulty was that the role responsibility of the team was unclear at the beginning. It wasn't explained well and team members had different perceptions of the team's role.

RESPONDENT 2: Would the work be shared equally? How would LAUSD interact (relate equally) with the team?

RESPONDENT 3: There were three interrelated difficulties. Although the role of the team had been explained, the roles of each individual on the team had not. Secondly, no one had been given the responsibility for chairing or leading the team. Finally, since the members of the team had not worked with each other before, there was a shakedown period during which we all got to know each other. Proceeding cautiously at the beginning, we were not as aggressive as we would have been in our own back yards.

RESPONDENT 4: Members of the team were not sure they would function as a team, since they had not worked in that kind of a situation before. Team members were not sure what the relationship to the district was going to be.

RESPONDENT 5: 1. Acceptance of the "team" concept. Will it be possible to share the work and get it done with our busy schedules?

2. Different work styles -- ways of approaching a problem -- these required much negotiation.

3. Trust -- that others will do their part -- that it would be equal.

4. Adjusting to other people's schedules.

TABLE C
Interview Responses
N = 5

Were these difficult to overcome?

RESPONDENT 1: The solution to the problem of role ambiguity evolved over time. The team stopped worrying about its role and just did what it thought it should.

RESPONDENT 2: Work is shared equally because of good interpersonal relationships; informal pressure and respect.

Committee finds it easy to interact with the coordinator.

Felt committee had credibility problem. R & E administrator and Integration coordinator helped here -- made the committee feel its efforts should be honest and and the results would be useful.

Clear roles and responsibilities were defined by the group through evaluation and recognition of individual strengths.

RESPONDENT 3: We did not have an a priori management model to follow so we had to construct one ourselves. This was done by identifying tasks and assigning people to them. As team members began to assume responsibility for certain tasks, they better understood their roles. The lack-of-leadership problem was solved when someone took on the role of coordinator, which facilitated the identification and understanding of individual roles.

RESPONDENT 4: No, once the team had a specific task to deal with the initial situation was overcome.

RESPONDENT 5: All were easy except #2 (getting the members to coalesce into a team). Mainly because of our prior histories together (we knew each other). The "style" problem still exists. Our approaches to a problem differ -- we have different conceptual styles.

TABLE D
Interview Responses: Item 4
$N_i = 5$

Would this be an organizational structure that you would recommend to other research and evaluation administrators for planning and conducting evaluations? Why?

RESPONDENT 1: Although this co-equals team approach worked with this group, I am not ready to advocate it as advantageous in all cases. The replicability of this team's success depends heavily on the technical and interpersonal skills, school understanding, and compatability of the people selected.

RESPONDENT 2: Yes, with reservations.

Personnel selection: It is important to find the right mix on the team.

It is a way for university people to make a contribution.

It is a chance for field people to be exposed to university types.

RESPONDENT 3: No. I would not recommend this structure unless it had strong, clearly defined leadership. Having the multitude of skills represented by the team is necessary but not sufficient. Any kind of team requires leadership. This leadership can come from within the team or outside the team but it must be provided.

RESPONDENT 4: Recommend it for planning. Have reservations about conducting evaluations, because the team was external to the administrative structure that was conducting the evaluation, and lines of responsibility were not clear.

RESPONDENT 5: Yes. Because having five senior people gives perceptual power. Brainstorming and a better broduct. Also we each brought different expertise and points of view.

Some discussion of the process we will use should occur. We jumped in before the process was defined. "How will we proceed?"

We need a leader to keep us on the task. At first we worked at cross-purposes. Perhaps the leader is not needed at the beginning but is needed later on. Someone took the role eventually and it was needed.

There was sometimes a communications gap -- some were not informed -- things got out without all knowing it.

TABLE E
Interview Responses: Item 5
N = 5

What other questions about the team approach need to be asked? What are your responses to the questions?

RESPONDENT 1: I think one area of interest about the team approach is its cost effectiveness. Is the team approach cost-effective? Although I believe that, in this case, it has been cost-effective, it may not always be so. Again, it depends largely on the people selected to be on the team. Another interesting question deals with support services. What support services best enhance this approach? This is a sensitive question for me to answer but I will say that things are functioning better this year than they were last year. And then there is the issue of credibility. How does the team approach impact on the credibility of the evaluation? I think the team approach, by providing an aggregation of skills and professionalism, serves to maximize the credibility of the evaluation effort.

RESPONDENT 2: Incentive: "Why did you join the team?"

Money, dedication, community service, personal affiliations.

What are the risks for the team participant?

What if the district doesn't like the report?

Reputation. Discreditation.

What are the risks of being used politically?

RESPONDENT 3: How effective is the co-equals evaluation planning team structure? This team grew to be effective. Its products were good. This effectiveness resulted from the quality of the team members and their willingness to get things done. The team was inefficient, however, because we were proceeding cautiously. It took a long time to get going. A related question involves cost effectiveness. How cost-effective is this structure? The team structure is probably cost effective because of the much greater abilities available than with any one individual evaluator. If you consider the time factor, however, the cost effectiveness would be somewhat lower.

RESPONDENT 4: Whether or not it was cost effective, both fiscal and political. My hunch is that the political might offset the fiscal.

RESPONDENT 5: Don't know. What about cost-effectiveness? Can you afford it?

It would be more difficult with five strangers. When some couldn't work, others filled in without resentment -- it might be more difficult with strangers.

ADMINISTRATOR'S ANALYSIS

My analysis of the responses is that the team reacted predictably and appropriately to the co-equals team structure. Each member was quite aware of the skills brought to the team. In addition, each member perceived himself or herself as a leader. Because each felt this way, the "professionalism" of the group would not let the structure fail. The administrator was aware that all of the team members were leaders and not followers. Therefore, it was felt that the true leader(s) would evolve eventually. It was felt that designating a leader at the very beginning would have given a mixed message of super leader and "lesser" followers. The administrator was aware of the anxiety generated because of this situation and eventually started the process for the team to select their own leader. Although this was a slower process, I felt it was better than designating a leader at the beginning.

According to the responses, all of the team members were equally fearful that a team member would not fulfill his or her work commitment. This was a legitimate fear. However, when the tasks were divided as the work evolved, all of the team members worked equally hard to produce reports of high quality.

Several of the team members mentioned that the co-equals evaluation management model was new to them; therefore, their roles were unclear. This was true. The administrator had a conceptual framework for the model in mind but had not used it before either. The team, as it worked, provided a better understanding of what the roles could be on a co-equals team.

The majority of the team members felt that the co-equals approach to evaluation could be recommended to other research and evaluation administrators with certain precautions or reservations. The main thought was that the administrator must have the skill to select persons who will work well together. Two additional teams have been organized by the administrator and are working together successfully and productively on other projects.

According to the team members, the principal strengths of a co-equals approach to planning an evaluation were that team brainstorming generated a better product, the different expertise of the members brought together many skills to be used -- "conceptual power" -- and, field persons (research and evaluation district staff) received on-the-job training from university type evaluators. All felt that this was a cost-effective structure for evaluating a program. One team member stated, "... probably cost-effective because of the much greated abilities available than with any one individual evaluator."

The major weaknesses cited by the team were the lack of clarity for their roles and the lack of a pre announced team leader. Although this was an

intentional process, it might be valuable to see what happens when a leader is designated at the beginning and the roles also assigned. However, it is my belief that this in essence would negate the co-equals approach because the research and evaluation administrator would be the actual leader.

CONCLUSION:

The co-equals team approach to planning, managing and reporting an evaluation has proved to be a successful and productive evaluation management model. Since it is an evolving model, more techniques and information will be generated as the model is replicated in other research and evaluation organizations. In this resources-dwindling environment, the fact that this approach is cost-effective should encourage others to utilize this model because as one co-equal team member observed, one evaluator could not have all of the skills that a team would have.

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